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## Emptiness through *dhammas* or Emptiness of *dhammas*: understanding of Emptiness in *Theravāda* Meditation Traditions

### Introduction

This paper explores the understanding of emptiness (Pāli: *suññatā*; Sanskrit: *śūnyatā*) in *Theravāda* meditation traditions in Burma and Thailand in relation to the roles of *dhammas/dharmas* in the Buddhist path. In so doing, I shall briefly highlight differences in interpretation of the theory of *dhamma/dharmas* in the *Theravāda* and *Mādhyamaka* traditions. Moreover, I shall assess the extent to which ‘emptiness of *dhammas*’ as understood in these meditation traditions reflect the *Madhyamaka* perspective.

The concept of emptiness itself has been understood differently in the *Śrāvakayāna* (the vehicle of hearers or disciples) and the *Mahāyana* (the great vehicle). In the *Mahāprajñāpāramitāsāstra*, it is stated that

“While the *Śrāvakayāna* teaches only the emptiness of beings (*sattvaśūnyatā*), the *Mahāyana* teaches both the emptiness of beings and the emptiness of *dhammas* (*dharmaśūnyatā*)”.<sup>1</sup>

The assumption therefore is that the *Theravāda*, which is said to be derived from the former vehicle, would go as far as the emptiness of beings. Indeed, *Theravādins* would reject the idea of emptiness of *dhammas* as advocated by *Mādhayamikas*.

For the *Theravādins*, all *dhammas*, namely, matter (*rūpa*), mental concomitants (*cetasika*), consciousness (*citta*) and nirvana (*nibbāna*), are ultimate realities (*paramattha-dhammas*). The description of *dhammas* as ultimate realities refers to the fact that the mental and material *dhammas* represent the utmost limits to which the analysis of empirical existence can be stretched. *Dhammas* are ultimately real but transitory existents, each with its own self-nature (*sabhāva*).<sup>2</sup> Karunadasa writing on the *dhamma* theory from *Theravāda*

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<sup>1</sup> Lamotte’s translation of *Mahāprajñāpāramitāsāstra*, vol. IV, cited in Skroupski (unpublished).

<sup>2</sup> The *Sarvāstivāda* school, one of the early schools in the history of Buddhism, asserts that the substances of all *dhammas* persist in all the three divisions of time - past, present and future - while their manifestations as phenomena are impermanent and subject to change. For the *Sarvāstivādins* (adherents of the existence of everything), a *dhamma* in essence continues to subsist in all the three temporal periods. Thus, it resulted in the transformation of the *dhamma* theory into a *svabhāvavada*, ‘the doctrine of own-nature’. Therefore, people often argue that ‘own-nature’ is similar to having ‘*atta*’, ‘self’ in ontological sense. The *Theravādins* on the other hand “assert the existence of the present and part of the past ... and the non-existence of the future and part of the past”. Lamotte 1988: 600-601.

*Abhidhamma* perspective states that “although the term *sabhāva* is used as synonym for *dhamma* [by Sri Lankan commentators], it [i.e. *sabhāva*] is interpreted in such a way that it means the very absence of *sabhāva* in any sense that implies a substantial mode of being”.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, for a *dhamma* or consciousness to arise there must be at least seven conditions or components.<sup>4</sup> The fact that an occurrence of a *dhamma* requires multiple causes or conditions is termed as *sabhāva* by the commentarial traditions. Thus, a *dhamma* is said to be borne by its own conditions (*paccayehi dhariyanti ti dhamma*). In accordance with this view, one of the definitions of *dhamma* given in the commentaries is “what is called a *dhamma* is the mere fact of occurrence due to appropriate conditions”.<sup>5</sup> In addition, *dhammas* in the *Theravāda* tradition are understood to be empty of self or (anything) pertaining to a self. For the *Theravādins*, therefore, emptiness of *dhammas* means *sabbe dhammā anattā* - all *dhammas* are not self.<sup>6</sup>

By contrast, the *Mādhyamaka* hold that *dharma*s themselves are empty of proper nature, of essence and proper character.<sup>7</sup> According to Nāgārjuna, *dhammas* do not really exist, they exist as merely designations and mere names; their existence is only conventional. This debate on the nature of *dhamma/dharma* has been continued since the early periods of Buddhism up to the present. While the exploration of the nature of *dhammas* as ontological realities or otherwise has attracted a keen interest from modern scholars,<sup>8</sup> it is not the aim of this paper to pursue debates surrounding their ontological status. Rather, it aims to highlight the role of such philosophically sophisticated ideas on the Buddhist meditative path. Given the need to skilfully use the *dhammas* in Buddhist meditation practices to attain *nibbāna/nirvāṇa*, this paper will explore the understanding of emptiness in *Theravāda* meditation traditions.

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<sup>3</sup> Karunadasa 1996:12.

<sup>4</sup> Whenever a consciousness arises, together with it there arise at least seven mental concomitants. These seven are called universal mental concomitants (*sabbacittasādharaṇa*).

<sup>5</sup> In the *Visuddhimagga* sub-commentary, it is stated as “*yathāpaccayaṃ hi pavattimattaṃ etaṃ sabhāvadhammo*”. VsmT 462, cit. in Karunadasa 1996: n. 49. See Karunadasa’s (1996) work on the theory of *Dhamma* and various definitions of *dhamma* from the perspective of *Theravāda Abhidhamma*.

<sup>6</sup> That all *dhammas/dharma*s are not self is accepted by all Buddhist schools, but expressed differently.

<sup>7</sup> Skorupski (unpublished).

<sup>8</sup> Warder 1971; Rahula 1974; Carter 1976; Karundasa (1996); Gethin 2004, 2005; Sujato (undated).

Understood at its highest level, emptiness is an epithet of *nibbāna*. Within the *Theravāda* tradition, there are many different methods of attaining *nibbāna*. From the perspective of modern meditation traditions in Burma and Thailand, I shall explore how emptiness (or *nibbāna*) is achieved through the contemplation of *dhammas*, as understood in the Pāli *Abhidhamma*. In particular, I shall assess the understanding of emptiness and the practices to attain the highest emptiness, *nibbāna*, in ‘orthodox’ and ‘unorthodox’ meditation traditions in Burma and Thailand. The notion of orthodoxy in this paper refers to the extent of what is held to be authoritative by the majority of *Theravādins*. Thus, the ‘unorthodox’ traditions are assessed compared to what has been advocated in *Visuddhimagga* (The Path of Purification),<sup>9</sup> which has become a manual for the *Theravāda* meditative path.

## General Understanding of Emptiness in *Theravāda*

To have an overview of the understanding of emptiness in *Theravāda*, we must turn to the *Sutta-piṭaka*, which includes two major discourses and several smaller ones<sup>10</sup> on the teaching of emptiness. In these discourses, according to Thanissaro Bhikkhu, emptiness is defined in three distinct, but interrelated ways: emptiness as 1) an approach to meditation, 2) an attribute of the senses and their objects and 3) a state of concentration.<sup>11</sup> Emptiness in the first sense means emptiness of disturbance or stress, where the meditator is taught, as in the *Mahā-suññatā-sutta*, to “appreciate the lack of disturbance as a positive accomplishment and see any remaining disturbance created by the mind as a problem to be solved”.<sup>12</sup> Emptiness as an attribute focuses on the doctrine of non-self (*anattā*) – i.e. the world is empty of self and anything pertaining to a self. In Buddhist thought, the world pertains to our experiences in relation the external world. In this sense, the *Suñña-sutta* states that “The eye is empty of a self or of anything pertaining to a self. Forms ... Eye-consciousness ... Eye-contact is empty

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<sup>9</sup> Ñāṇamoli’s (1991) translation of *Visuddhimagga* composed by Buddhaghosa in the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE.

<sup>10</sup> *Cula-suññatā-sutta*, MN 121; *Mahā-suññatā-sutta*, MN 122; *Suñña-sutta*, SN 35.85; *Mogharaja-manava-pucchā* SN 5.15; *Phena-sutta*, SN 22.95

<sup>11</sup> Thanissaro Bhikkhu 2010.

<sup>12</sup> Thanissaro Bhikkhu 2010.

of a self or of anything pertaining to a self".<sup>13</sup> Similarly, the other five senses and their objects and the related consciousness are empty of a self or anything pertaining to a self. The third type of emptiness is related the state of concentration achieved at the third formless absorption (*jhāna*) of nothingness, where the consciousness takes the "void, secluded, non-existent state" as its object.<sup>14</sup> Although this state of *jhāna* is accompanied by calm and equanimity, it is not the highest emptiness.

In the scheme of seven stages of purification as systematized in *Visuddhimagga*, the third formless *jhāna* of nothingness is achieved only at the second stage of purification, the 'Purification of Consciousness'. Hence, the insight into the impermanent, suffering and non-self nature of things has not been developed – i.e. the purification by wisdom has not been performed. By going beyond this stage of absorption and by practising the insight (*vipassanā*) meditation up to the sixth stage of the purification of wisdom, one 'discerns formations as void' in eight ways (with a total of forty-two modes) by attributing the three characteristics and seeing them void. The meditator then attains the knowledge of equanimity about formations – i.e. he becomes indifferent to "both terror and delight" and neither takes them as 'I' nor as 'mine'. Having established in the equanimity based on wisdom, the meditator still persists in the triple contemplation, which becomes a condition for the noble people (*āriya-puggala*). The meditator is said to be at the 'triple gateway to liberation'. The 'triple gateway to liberation' refers to the three contemplations: the contemplation of all formations as impermanent leads to the signless liberation; the contemplation of all formations as suffering leads to the desireless liberation and the contemplation of all things (*dhammas*) leads to the void liberation (*suññatā-vimutti*).<sup>15</sup> Given that the void liberation is achieved through the contemplation of all things as not-self or empty of self, it can be suggested that emptiness in *Theravāda* is understood both as a means and as an ends. Yet, it is a means so far as one uses the *dhammas* as the meditation objects in the contemplation of emptiness or voidness.

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<sup>13</sup> "Suñña Sutta: Empty" (SN 35.85), translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. *Access to Insight*, June 7, 2009, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn35/sn35.085.than.html>.

<sup>14</sup> *Visuddhimagga*, X, 32 -35. pp. 327-328.

<sup>15</sup> *Visuddhimagga*, XXI, 53-73, pp.676-682.

## Understanding of Emptiness in Orthodox *Theravāda* Meditation Tradition

Since the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE *Visuddhimagga* has become an authoritative manual for many *Theravāda* meditation traditions. While some meditation traditions in Burma and Thailand, e.g. the Mahāsi tradition and the Ajahn Naeb tradition respectively, do not explicitly follow the path prescribed in *Visuddhimagga*,<sup>16</sup> the Pa-Auk meditation tradition in Burma follows it precisely. The Pa-Auk forest meditation tradition is founded by the Pa-Auk Sayadaw, Ven. Āciṇṇa (1934- ). The Pa-Auk Sayadaw teaches the meditators to have the theoretical knowledge of the matter, mental concomitants and consciousness in order to be used in the meditation. To attain *nibbāna*, “we must comprehend the impermanent, suffering, and non-self nature of mentality-materiality and their causes. Without knowing mentality-materiality and their causes, how can we comprehend that they are impermanent, suffering, and non-self? How can we practise *Vipassanā*?”<sup>17</sup> Hence, according to the Pa-Auk tradition, one must first ‘know’ the *dharmas* (through intellectual acquisition) and then ‘see’ the emptiness of the *dharmas* by the three contemplations as mentioned in *Visuddhimagga*.

## Understanding of Emptiness in Unorthodox *Theravāda* Meditation Traditions

As the authoritative status of *Visuddhimagga* (and *Abhidhamma*) is challenged by some modern *Theravāda* meditation traditions, e.g. the The-Inn-Gu Sayadaw of Burma and the Ajahn Buddhādāsa of Thailand, the understanding of emptiness seems to have shifted. I shall first look at Buddhādāsa’s teaching on emptiness, the meditation technique and his interpretation of Dependent Origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*).

Buddhādāsa renders emptiness as *chit-wang* in Thai; literally translated as ‘void-mind’.<sup>18</sup> According to Buddhādāsa, “[t]he mind has realised emptiness through seeing clearly

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<sup>16</sup> Bond (1988) has highlighted the debate between the traditionalists, who held *Visuddhimagga* as an authoritative *Theravāda* text, and the reformers, who initiated the lay meditation movement in Sri Lanka and followed the Mahāsi tradition. The traditionalists argued that the Mahāsi technique is unorthodox because it uses the movement of abdomen as its meditation object and does not follow the gradual path as advocated in *Visuddhimagga*. However, a careful analysis of the Mahāsi technique shows that it does follow the seven stages of purification, although the meditator is not required to develop the *jhanas*. This is also true for the Ajahn Naeb tradition.

<sup>17</sup> Pa-Auk Sayadaw 2000.

<sup>18</sup> Jackson 1987.

that there is nothing at all that can fulfil the meaning of the words ‘self’ or ‘belonging to a self.’ ... This is the mind that is identical with emptiness”.<sup>19</sup> Hence, “the mind in its natural state is emptiness”.<sup>20</sup> The void-mind is thus said to be empty of the clinging of the notion of ‘I’ or ‘mine’. It is based on naturally pure state of mind.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, he advocates that the word ‘empty’ or ‘emptiness’ is pointing two characteristics.

- 1) It refers to the characteristic of all things: all things include the materiality, mentality, the Path, their Fruits and *nibbāna* itself are characterised by emptiness, absence of a permanent, independent entity.
- 2) It refers to the characteristic of the mind that is free from all grasping and clinging: emptiness is the characteristic of non-clinging mind. This ‘void-mind’ is defined as the foundation of *nibbāna* by Buddhādāsa.<sup>22</sup>

“Thus, the mind seeing emptiness in all things disintegrates of itself, leaving only emptiness.” That is, the mind itself is emptiness. In this sense his view on emptiness seems to be similar to that of *Madhyamaka*. Although his view on emptiness seems to be influenced by the *Madhyamaka* philosophy, it does conform to the general understanding of emptiness in *Theravāda*: his view on emptiness essentially is understood in the context of the doctrine of non-self. This is because he is silent on defining the ‘emptiness of *dhammas*’ as empty of own-nature. For him, the highest emptiness is ‘the reminderless extinction of ego’ or the ‘non-arising of ego-consciousness’. Buddhādāsa refers to this emptiness as “supreme unsurpassable emptiness” (*paramānuttarasuññatā*).

Another aspect that which is challenged by Buddhādāsa is the orthodox view that the path to liberation is a gradual process and that *nibbāna* is a thousand lives away.<sup>23</sup> That the gradual path is to be practised by the world renunciators – i.e. the monastic members – has been particularly questioned by Buddhādāsa. He maintains that “the way to practice in order to ‘abide with emptiness’ (*suññatā-vihāra*) lies right here”. That is, “living and breathing with constant awareness of emptiness is called ‘abiding with emptiness’, which is said to be attained here and now in the midst of the daily life and work. Moreover, in terms of practice,

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<sup>19</sup> Buddhādāsa 1961.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> The ‘void-mind’ is therefore similar to the luminous mind.

<sup>22</sup> Jackson 1987: 130.

<sup>23</sup> King 1964; Bond 1988.

Buddhadāsa advocates that one establishes mindfulness so as to prevent defilements (*kilesa*) from arising. “In Buddhadāsa’s system, defilements are not to be removed by actively suppressing them, but rather prevented from developing by remaining mindful and so not allowing their necessary preconditions to arise”.<sup>24</sup> This means to prevent the arising of clinging to the notion of ‘self’ or ‘I’ or ‘mine’. Given that Buddhadāsa defines the ‘void-mind’ as the basis of attaining *nibbāna*, in his view all that is required to begin the practice towards *nibbāna* is to remain ‘mindful’ or ‘being still’ in order to prevent the mind’s original purity from being defiled. Therefore, Buddhadāsa’s interpretation of emptiness, as denoting both the fundamental characteristic of mind and the basis of *nibbāna*, radically simplifies traditional Buddhist meditative practices.<sup>25</sup> Thus, the path to liberation becomes much more accessible to the laity.

As previously highlighted, Buddhadāsa’s view on emptiness is influenced by the *Madhyamaka* philosophy; it seems that his meditative path is also influenced by *Mahāyana* meditative notions. This can be seen in his use of the word ‘being still’, as mentioned above. He said,

“‘Being still’ means not admitting sense-objects into the mind but content with them. For instance, when the eye sees form, if there is merely the seeing, then that is called not admitting visible forms into the mind”.<sup>26</sup>

Here, he is referring to the process of becoming or birth in relation to Dependent Origination.<sup>27</sup> In the context of Dependent Origination, he is defining ‘being still’ as ‘letting contact stop at contact’. He continued,

“If you cannot do that and feeling of satisfaction and dissatisfaction (*vedanā*) arise, let it stop there; do not allow desires based on those feelings to develop.”

Although letting stop at just contact, according to Buddhadāsa, is possible, it is an extremely high level of practice. If one can do it, then the ego-consciousness does not arise. It is the end of suffering, immutable emptiness.

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<sup>24</sup> Jackson 1987: 135.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Buddhadāsa 1961.

<sup>27</sup> The twelve casual links of Dependent Origination are: ignorance (*avijjā*), karmic formations (*sankhāra*), consciousness (*viññāna*), name and form (*nāmarūpa*), six sense bases (*saḷāyatana*), contact (*phassa*), feeling (*vedanā*), craving (*taṇhā*), clinging (*upādāna*), life (*bhava*), rebirth (*jāti*) and old-age and death (*jarāmaraṇa*).



Buddhadāsa also challenges Buddhaghosa's interpretation of Dependent Origination as the literal rebirth process:<sup>28</sup> the twelve links are traditionally understood as occurring over three lives.<sup>29</sup> For Buddhadāsa, birth corresponds to the 'birth of ego-consciousness'. "The physical birth is meaningless until there is a mental birth, a birth of ego-consciousness".<sup>30</sup> For example, if there is contact with a sense-object and self-consciousness arises, then there is a new birth, and followed by death. While this kind of interpretation may seem to be heretical, it does fit into the scheme of theme that Buddhadāsa is advocating, namely, the realization of emptiness is possible here and now by both the monastic and the laity.

The The-Inn-Gu meditation technique<sup>31</sup> does not follow the path prescribed in *Visuddhimagga*. This meditation technique is said to be based entirely on his own meditative experiences and achievements of Ven. U Okkatha (1912 – 1973), the First The-Inn-Gu Sayadaw.<sup>32</sup> The primary technique relies on mindfulness of breathing (*ānāpānasati*), which is built by strong and rapid breathing. It, therefore, seems similar to the technique used by other meditation traditions, such as the Sunlun tradition described by Kornfield (1977). Under the The-Inn-Gu tradition, the meditator has to breathe at twice or thrice the normal breathing rate. In addition, it is the The-Inn-Gu tradition to sit for 2-hour sessions for all meditators, including the beginners, with, determination to complete the session without changing posture. Although the mindfulness of breathing is the basic technique for all meditators, The-Inn-Gu Sayadaw and his successors have used various meditation objects, e.g. sensation/feelings, foulness or the thirty-two parts of the body, according to the trait and experience of the meditator. The-Inn-Gu Sayadaw said, "With one type of medicine, you cannot be a doctor. For an elephant, [you have to] feed sugar cane. For a tiger, [you have to] feed meat".<sup>33</sup> Although these meditation objects or *dhammas* are used in the meditation practices, unlike the Pa-Auk Sayadaw, The-Inn-Gu Sayadaw does not teach these *dhammas* as prerequisite

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<sup>28</sup> Jackson 1987.

<sup>29</sup>The first two links pertain to the past life; the next eight links pertain to the present life, and the last two corresponds to the future life or rebirth. See *Visuddhimagga*, XVII, 287, pp. 596-597.

<sup>30</sup> Buddhadāsa 1961.

<sup>31</sup> Since The-Inn-Gu Sayadaw's teachings have not been translated into English, this section on his meditation methods and understanding of emptiness is based on my translation and a short article written by me in 2009. See Kyaw 2009.

<sup>32</sup> Paññājota, 2003.

<sup>33</sup> This is my translation from one of his talk. See Kyaw 2009.

knowledge for the meditation. This is because first he does not know any Buddhist literature for he is said to be merely literate. Secondly, he is very critical of having theoretical concepts because he argues that these ideas and concepts can deceive the mind. For him, the highest level of emptiness is achieved when there is no clinging of ideas or concepts.

Emptiness according to The-Inn-Gu Sayadaw is mainly understood in the context of *nibbāna* or the cessation of all suffering. He said, “From the perspective of the ultimate truth (*paramattha-sacca*), the whole world is empty”.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, he explains that at the total cessation of suffering, no *dhamma* is being grasped at or clung onto. At this natural state, it is empty. The mind at its natural state, according to him, “stops” or “ceases”.<sup>35</sup> If it still goes through the sense-doors, then there is still a danger. This is because defilement will arise. Hence, there arises erroneous beliefs and erroneous perceptions in/of ‘self’. For him, when this erroneous belief in ‘self’ disappears, there is no more suffering. When asked whether he would call this cessation of suffering as *nibbāna*, he replied, “[If such experience is called *nibbāna*], it is a designation [*paññatti*]”.<sup>36</sup> This implies that he would not put anything labels because the mind simply “ceases” at the highest emptiness. Therefore, these descriptions of his experience are consistent with the description given in *Mahāprajñāpāramitāśāstra*. “The state of *nirvāṇa* is represented by the appeasement of the *citta* [mind], or more concretely in the non-thinking of the *citta*”.<sup>37</sup>

## Conclusion

In general, the notion of emptiness in *Theravāda* can be seen as an extension of the fundamental doctrine of non-self. In both the *Sutta-piṭaka* and the *Abhidhamma* literature, emptiness is understood as ‘empty of self’ or ‘empty of anything belonging to a self’. This understanding can also be seen *Visuddhimagga*. Under the section of ‘discerning formation as void’, the emptiness or voidness is contemplated with reference to the three characteristics, i.e. impermanent, suffering and non-self, in eight ways. Moreover, the meditation traditions

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<sup>34</sup> In Burmese, it is called “*bha-mha-ma-shi-buu*”.

<sup>35</sup> In Burmese, it is said, “*sate-ka-yat-nay-thi*”.

<sup>36</sup> In Burmese, it is called “*panyat*”. Translated from Burmese source, Paññajota 2003.

<sup>37</sup> Skorupski, (unpublished).

studied, whether they are orthodox or unorthodox, understand emptiness in the same way as in the Pāli literature. In addition, there seems to be a stratification of emptiness in these texts and traditions. They all agree that the highest level of emptiness is the cessation of suffering or clinging to the notion of ‘I’ or ‘mine’.

While the highest emptiness is said to be realised through *dharmas* by all the meditation masters in this study, *dharmas* have been used differently in these meditation traditions. This is because these meditation traditions rely on different sources for their authority and teachings: the Pa-Auk tradition holds *Visuddhimagga* as its authoritative source; Buddhādāsa relies on the *Suttanta* and daily experience as his authoritative source and the The-Inn-Gu Sayadaw relies solely on his own personal experience to support his teachings. Despite these differences, it can be suggested that all these meditation traditions still operate within the boundaries of the *Theravāda* view. This means ‘emptiness of *dharmas*’ in *Theravāda* meditation traditions is understood to the extent that all *dharmas*, including ideas and concepts, are not clung onto or grasped as ‘self’ or ‘pertaining to a self’. They are silent on the issue of the *dharmas* being empty of self-nature as advocated by the *Mādhyamika* School. At the highest level of emptiness Buddhaghosa expressed the cessation as “the non-occurrence of consciousness and its concomitants”,<sup>38</sup> while Śāntideva described it as “when the objects of the mind cease to exist one cannot say anything”.<sup>39</sup> Hence, the *Theravadins* and the *Mādhyamikas* do agree that the final attainment of cessation is “the stoppage of the *citta* and discourses”.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> *Visuddhimagga*, XXIII, 18, p.731.

<sup>39</sup> Skorupski (unpublished) wrote, “Śāntideva says that when one becomes permeated with the notion of emptiness, the notion of existence disappears ... There is nothing more to say or to speak about. One remains silent. When the objects of the mind cease to exist one cannot say anything.” *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, Chapter IX, verses 33-35.

<sup>40</sup> Skorupski (unpublished).

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